THE DIVIDED MIND

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A Theological and Philosophical Analysis of *The Divided Mind: Contending Descartes*

Abstract

This paper undertakes a theological and philosophical examination of *The Divided Mind: Contending Descartes* by S. C. Sayles, situating it within the Reformed tradition and the wider contest between revelation and autonomy inaugurated by René Descartes. It argues that Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum* initiated the modern fragmentation of consciousness by grounding certainty in self-reference rather than in divine revelation. Sayles' Logos-centred refutation re-establishes the dependence of thought upon the eternal Word, exposing how the Cartesian method, while analytically brilliant, produced an epistemology of exile. The study proceeds through an analysis of Descartes' major doctrines—his turn to the self, the dualism of mind and body, the rule of clarity and distinctness, and his circular appeal to God—and contrasts each with the Calvinist vision of knowledge as covenantal participation in the Logos. Drawing upon Augustine, Calvin, Van Til, and Schaeffer, it concludes that Sayles' work restores unity where modernity has sown division: truth is not deduced from the *Cogito* but revealed in the *Logos*.

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1 – Introduction: Descartes and the Crisis of the Divided Mind

1.1 The Cartesian Legacy

René Descartes (1596–1650) stands as the pivotal architect of modern epistemology. His program of radical doubt, culminating in the affirmation *Cogito, ergo sum*, shifted philosophy's centre of gravity from the cosmos to consciousness. By seeking an indubitable foundation within the self, Descartes severed the medieval synthesis that had united faith and reason under the light of divine illumination. The intellect, once

viewed as a participatory ray of the *lumen Dei*, became an autonomous luminary whose certainty derived from its own operations. Thus, the age of metaphysical participation yielded to the age of methodological independence.

Sayles characterises this transformation as the birth of the "divided mind." [1] In his reading, Descartes' search for clarity fractured creation into two realms—thinking and extension, soul and body, subject and object—while simultaneously alienating the human intellect from its divine source. What the *Cogito* promised as unity through method resulted in disunity through autonomy. Sayles' project, therefore, is not merely historical criticism but theological diagnosis: to expose in Descartes the metaphysical origin of modern estrangement.

1.2 Sayles and the Series *Veritas Contra Mundum*

Within the *Veritas Contra Mundum* ("Truth Against the World") series, each volume contends with a major thinker of unbelief on his own terrain. The method is dialectical yet doxological: the idiom of the adversary turned toward confession of the Word. *The Divided Mind* occupies the first position chronologically, engaging the father of modern philosophy as the progenitor of the world's divided reasoning. Sayles' guiding principle is the presuppositional axiom articulated by Van Til: no system that begins with the autonomous self can conclude with the sovereign God. The Cartesian experiment becomes the paradigm of this futility.

In re-framing Descartes' project through Calvin's opening sentence of the *Institutes*—that "true wisdom consists in the knowledge of God and of ourselves"[2]—Sayles reverses Descartes' reversal. The philosopher sought self-knowledge as the path to God; the theologian insists that knowledge of self is impossible apart from knowledge of God. Thus the encounter between *Cogito* and *Logos* is not a quarrel between faith and reason but between two orders of reason: one self-referential, the other revelational. Sayles' task is to demonstrate that genuine rationality is covenantal—that thought subsists only within the Word that sustains it.

2 – The Cogito and the Autonomy of Reason

2.1 The Turn Inward

In the *Discourse on the Method* (1637) and the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Descartes introduced what Sayles calls "the first systematic act of metaphysical inwardness."[3] Doubting the deliverances of sense, tradition, and even mathematics, Descartes sought one point that could not be falsified by any possible illusion. He found it in the experience of doubting itself: *Cogito, ergo sum* — "I think, therefore I am." The act of consciousness became the foundation of being.

This declaration, which Descartes offered as indubitable, subtly displaced the ontological hierarchy inherited from Augustine and Aquinas. The mind, no longer receptive to divine illumination, became its own light. Whereas Augustine had confessed *“Unless He illumine, we cannot know,”*[4] Descartes effectively proclaimed, *“Unless I think, I cannot be.”* The intellect’s act of reflection assumed primacy over the reality it beheld. For Sayles, this marked “the moment at which reason ceased to kneel.”[5]

The *Cogito* thus inaugurated an epistemic solipsism that subsequent centuries would labour to escape. If the certainty of existence depends upon thought, then being itself is reduced to a mode of self-awareness. Existence outside the mind must be proven rather than assumed, and proof requires mediation through the very consciousness that doubts it. The world becomes mirror rather than theatre, reflection rather than revelation.

2.2 The Reformed Critique of Autonomy

Sayles’ refutation of the *Cogito* draws upon the Reformed conviction that knowledge is covenantal. Man’s intellect is not a free-standing tribunal but a creaturely participation in divine reason. Calvin’s insistence that “all true wisdom consists of knowledge of God and of ourselves” is for Sayles the antidote to Cartesian self-sufficiency: the order of knowledge must proceed from Creator to creature, not conversely. Descartes’ reversal of this order constitutes, in Sayles’ phrase, “the epistemological Fall.”[6] The self that declares *ergo sum* imitates the serpent’s whisper —“Ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.”

Van Til’s analysis illuminates this dynamic. The *Cogito* presupposes the laws of logic, the continuity of identity, and the trustworthiness of consciousness—conditions intelligible only within a theistic framework. When Descartes treats these as self-evident, he “borrows capital from the Christian worldview while denying its bank.”[7] Sayles adopts this Van Tilian insight, describing the *Cogito* as “a parasite upon the Logos.”[8] Its certainty is real but derivative; its light shines only by reflection from the divine sun.

2.3 The Parody of Aseity

In Scripture, God alone possesses aseity—the property of being from Himself (*a se*). Descartes’ *Cogito*, by deriving existence from thought, transfers aseity to the creature. Sayles calls this “the parody of Sinai”: the *I AM* becomes *I think.*[9] This inversion, though unintentional, transforms metaphysics into anthropology. The mind that should adore now asserts; the intellect that should receive now legislates. Descartes’ desire for certainty is thus not impiety but misplaced piety: the longing for divine stability sought within human autonomy.

The Reformed critique restores proportion. Certainty is not manufactured by introspection but given by revelation. “He knows me; therefore I am.” The believer’s assurance rests not in the self-reflexive act of thought but in the faithfulness of the God who speaks. Sayles summarises: “The *Cogito* is the soul’s attempt to baptise its anxiety with reason.”[10] Only the Logos can still that anxiety, for He alone grounds both being and knowing.

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3 – Dualism and the Ontological Fracture

3.1 Mind and Matter Divided

Having established the thinking self as indubitable, Descartes next sought to recover the world from doubt. He did so by positing two substances: *res cogitans* (mind) and *res extensa* (matter). The former is unextended and self-conscious; the latter, extended and unconscious. Between them stands the mystery of interaction. The result is the modern *mind-body problem*: how can an immaterial thinker move a material body?

Sayles interprets this as the metaphysical symptom of a deeper theological disorder. “The dust and the breath that God joined in Eden,” he writes, “Descartes has sundered in the study.”[11] By redefining matter as mechanism, Descartes emptied creation of presence; by redefining mind as self-sufficient, he isolated spirit from communion. What Scripture presents as harmony—body animated by soul, soul upheld by God—became an antagonism of substances.

3.2 The Mechanisation of Creation

In *Le Monde* and the *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes portrayed the universe as a vast plenum of matter in motion governed by immutable laws. God, though Creator, acts through these laws rather than within them. Sayles calls this “Providence translated into physics.”[12] The world, once a theatre of divine glory, becomes a machine operating by mathematical necessity. Theologically, the shift replaces *Theos* with *ratio*: divine rationality without divine personality.

Calvin’s warning applies: “His essence is incomprehensible; we truly know Him only in His works.”[13] When those works are mechanised, their witness is muted. The Reformed tradition insists that natural law is the constant activity of the personal God; for Descartes, it becomes the autonomy of creation itself. Thus, even as he invoked God to guarantee order, he confined Him to the margins of mechanism. The heavens still declared, but their language had changed—from praise to calculation.

3.3 The Theological Cost: The Incarnation Undermined

If matter is inert mechanism, the union of divine and human natures in Christ becomes metaphysically unintelligible. The Word cannot meaningfully become flesh in a world where flesh is mere extension. Sayles highlights this irony: “The philosopher who defended the soul against the machine left no room for the God who became man.”[14] Cartesian dualism thus erodes the very Christology that medieval theology had built upon metaphysical participation. The Reformed corrective restores embodiment as integral to redemption: resurrection, not escape, is the destiny of the human person. In Christ, spirit and matter are reconciled without confusion; the true mediation occurs not in the pineal gland but in the hypostatic union.

3.4 Christ and the Restoration of Unity

Sayles’ Logos-centred metaphysic interprets the Incarnation as the divine answer to dualism. “Where Descartes divides, Christ unites.”[15] The eternal Word binds the intelligible and the material, heaven and earth, Creator and creation. The resurrection body, glorified yet physical, reveals that matter is not antithetical to spirit but capable of transfiguration. The cosmos, far from being a machine, is a living temple animated by the breath of God. In that vision, scientific regularity becomes covenantal faithfulness, and the laws of motion are hymns of divine consistency.

4 – The Criterion of Clarity and the Circle of Reason

4.1 The Natural Light and the Eclipse of Revelation

The Cartesian rule of *claritas et distinctio*—that whatever is perceived clearly and distinctly must be true—encapsulates the modern ambition to make epistemology autonomous. Descartes derived this principle from what he called the *lumen naturale*, the natural light of reason. The Scholastics had spoken of such light as a vestige of the divine image, but always under the greater illumination of grace. Descartes reversed the order: the *lumen naturale* became its own source. “Whatever is revealed by this natural light,” he wrote, “cannot in any way be open to doubt.”[16]

Sayles interprets this as the self-deification of intellect. The natural light, detached from the Word, is no longer the reflection of divine truth but its substitute. “Revelation is eclipsed not by denial but by excess of brightness,” he writes; “man’s own lamp outshines the sun that lit it.”[17] The epistemological rebellion thus masquerades as reverence: what was once received as grace is now claimed as possession.

From the Reformed perspective, this confidence ignores the noetic effects of sin. Calvin described the fallen mind as “a labyrinth of error,” capable of discerning fragments of truth yet incapable of their right use.[18] The *lumen naturale* is therefore not a secure foundation but a flicker awaiting rekindling by the Spirit. Sayles calls Descartes’ project “the conscience of Christendom translated into geometry”: the longing for assurance pursued through intellectual clarity rather than divine promise.[19] The method of doubt is a displaced act of repentance, performed before the mirror instead of the altar.

4.2 The Circle of Reason

Descartes’ attempt to certify the trustworthiness of his own clarity through the existence of a non-deceptive God leads inevitably to circularity. He affirms God’s reality because he perceives it clearly, yet the validity of clear perception depends upon God’s veracity. The proof presupposes its conclusion. Sayles remarks that “reason here chases its own tail around the void.”[20] Van Til would term this the self-referential collapse of autonomous thought: “The unbeliever’s circle is vicious because it encloses the creature within himself; the believer’s circle is virtuous because it encloses the creature within the Creator.”[21]

Sayles develops this distinction poetically: “Every circle begins somewhere; the question is whether its centre is man or God.”[22] For the Reformed mind, all human reasoning is necessarily circular in the sense that it appeals to its ultimate authority. The issue is not circularity but starting point. In the Cartesian circle, the self certifies truth; in the Christian circle, truth certifies the self. The only non-arbitrary foundation is the self-attesting God whose Word interprets every fact. When Descartes seeks certainty by internal coherence, he substitutes coherence for correspondence: the mind becomes its own cosmos, luminous yet airless.

4.3 The Myth of Neutrality

Underlying the rule of clarity is the assumption that reason can stand neutrally between belief and unbelief, examining evidence without presupposition. Van Til rejects this as a myth: “There is no island of neutrality between the Creator and the creature.”[23] Sayles echoes the same conviction, describing the *Cogito* as “the philosopher’s attempt to recreate Eden’s neutrality—knowledge of good and evil without submission to either.”[24] Neutral reason is impossible because every thought already operates within a worldview shaped by allegiance or rebellion.

Descartes’ method of universal doubt thus re-enacts the serpent’s temptation in intellectual form. By suspending trust in all external authority, he seeks to become judge of revelation itself. Yet, as Sayles points out, the very capacity to doubt presupposes faith in logic, memory,

and language—gifts of the God being tested. To doubt everything is to doubt nothing coherently. The *Cogito* survives its own scepticism only by unconsciously borrowing from revelation the stability it denies.

4.4 The Reformed Resolution

Sayles concludes that the remedy is not to abolish the *lumen naturale* but to reorient it. “The natural light,” he writes, “is the ember of the Logos in the creature; it burns rightly only when turned toward its source.”[25] In this renewed orientation, clarity and distinctness are no longer self-validating criteria but manifestations of divine faithfulness. True clarity is not the transparency of the intellect to itself but the transparency of creation to its Maker. The Spirit restores illumination not by adding new faculties but by sanctifying existing ones.

Thus the Reformed answer to Cartesian doubt is not methodological but theological: the light shines in darkness, and the darkness comprehends it not (John 1:5). Knowledge is secure not because the thinker cannot be deceived, but because God cannot deceive. The assurance Descartes sought through logic is found in the Lord who is Truth.

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5 – The Logos as Epistemic and Ontological Ground

5.1 The Biblical Counter-Principle: *Deus Dixit, Ergo Sum*

Where the Cartesian foundation is self-consciousness, the biblical foundation is divine speech. “God said, Let there be light,” and there was illumination both physical and intellectual. Sayles formulates the antithesis succinctly: “The *Cogito* says, I think, therefore I am; Revelation replies, He speaks, therefore I am.”[26] The creature’s being and knowing are thus communicative acts within the Word. To exist is to be addressed.

This doctrine of the Logos as epistemic ground unites Augustine’s illumination theory with Calvin’s theology of the Word and Spirit. All knowledge, sacred or secular, is participatory: “In Thy light shall we see light.”[27] The autonomy of reason is not only sin but impossibility, for even rebellion depends upon borrowed order. Van Til calls this “the inescapable covenantal situation of man.”[28] The unbeliever’s reasoning testifies against him because it functions only by the very coherence of the Logos he denies.

5.2 The Ontological Coherence of the Logos

Sayles extends this insight beyond epistemology into ontology. The Logos is not merely the medium of knowledge but the structure of reality. “The

universe is not material but informational," he writes elsewhere, "authored and sustained in the Mind of Christ."[29] This informational ontology reinterprets the Cartesian dualism of mind and matter as two aspects of one Logos-centred field. Reality coheres because it is spoken.

Here Sayles converges with the classical Reformed affirmation that "by Him all things consist" (Col 1:17). Existence is covenantal order; causation is continuous creation. Descartes' mechanistic laws become, in the Reformed vision, the regularities of divine fidelity. The world's intelligibility is therefore sacramental: every equation, every orbit, every neural firing is a trace of the Word. Where Descartes found geometry, Sayles finds grace.

5.3 Revelation and the Renewal of Reason

In this Logos-centred framework, revelation does not abolish reason but restores it to proper dependence. The intellect, freed from the burden of self-authentication, may exercise genuine inquiry as worship. Sayles follows Calvin in affirming that "all truth is God's truth," yet he adds Van Til's caution that truth must be interpreted within the covenant of revelation.[30] Science, philosophy, and theology thus share a common ground not in neutrality but in obedience. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of all epistemic coherence.

Reason, once divided by the *Cogito*, is reconciled in the *Verbum Dei*. "The Logos is the eternal ground of information, the field, and consciousness," Sayles writes, "the living architecture within which the mind finds its own meaning."[31] This is not fideism but metaphysical realism: the conviction that reality itself is rational because it is created by the rational God. The Word who made all things is the same Word who enlightens every mind; to know truly is to think after Him.

6 – Theological Implications: Knowledge, Worship, and Wholeness

6.1 From Doubt to Doxology

The movement from Descartes to Sayles is not merely a transition of ideas but of posture — from suspicion to adoration, from *Cogito* to *Credo*. Sayles interprets the crisis of the divided mind as a liturgical disorder. "The intellect was made to bow," he writes, "and when it refuses, it breaks."[32] Doubt is not a stage toward faith but the symptom of its absence; its cure is not further analysis but worship. In this respect, Sayles' project aligns with Augustine's dictum that "understanding is the reward of faith."[33]

For Reformed theology, the restoration of knowledge is inseparable from regeneration. The Spirit who renews the heart also renews the intellect,

restoring the analogical relation between human reason and divine truth. The believer no longer seeks certainty in reflection but rests in revelation. Thus epistemology becomes doxology: to know is to give thanks. Van Til's presuppositionalism is here transfigured into devotion — not argument against unbelief alone but worship of the self-attesting God who makes knowledge possible.

Sayles writes: "The mind redeemed ceases to revolve about itself; it enters the orbit of praise."[34] What Descartes sought through proof — the indubitability of being — the Christian receives through communion. The final epistemic act is not deduction but thanksgiving.

6.2 The Re-Enchanted Cosmos

The implications of this recovery extend beyond the individual mind to the entire creation. The Cartesian universe, rendered mechanical and silent, is replaced by a cosmos once again articulate with meaning. Sayles' theology of the field — the world as Logos-authored information — restores sacramentality to nature without lapsing into pantheism. Every atom speaks; every law witnesses. The stars are no longer machines of motion but choirs of praise. "All things," he writes, "exist in the Word as musical intervals in a single hymn."[35]

Such a vision fulfils rather than negates the scientific impulse. It sanctifies curiosity by situating it within covenant. The order discovered by mathematics is the rhythm of divine constancy; the beauty discerned by art is the reflection of divine glory. In this re-enchanted cosmos, knowledge becomes participation, and participation becomes worship. The intellectual vocation is thus priestly: to interpret creation before the face of God.

6.3 The Ethical and Ecclesial Dimension

Epistemology, for Sayles, cannot be abstracted from ethics. The divided mind produces a divided society; the reconciliation of thought requires the reconciliation of persons. The church, as community of revelation, becomes the living alternative to Cartesian isolation. Within it, knowledge is shared as grace, not hoarded as property. "The Spirit who illumines," Sayles observes, "also unites."[36] The ecclesial act of confession — *Credo in unum Deum* — is the communal counterpart to the *Cogito*. It is not the solitary "I think" but the corporate "We believe."

Here the Reformed emphasis on covenantal solidarity gains metaphysical depth. The covenant that grounds knowledge also constitutes community. Just as no thought is autonomous, no believer is self-contained. In the fellowship of truth, the intellect finds its final healing: relational wholeness mirroring the Triune communion of the Godhead.

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7 – Conclusion: From the Divided Mind to the Reconciled Soul

Sayles' *The Divided Mind: Contending Descartes* stands as a profound theological exorcism of the modern project. It neither dismisses nor despises Descartes but redeems his quest for certainty by restoring it to the Logos. Descartes' cry, "I think, therefore I am," arises from the anxiety of a mind seeking foundation within itself. Sayles' answer, echoing the gospel, is "He is, therefore I think." The true foundation is ontological before it is epistemological; being precedes consciousness because the Word precedes both.

Through engagement with Calvin, Augustine, Van Til, and the Johannine prologue, Sayles recovers the unity that the *Cogito* fractured. Knowledge and faith, reason and revelation, body and soul, cosmos and Creator—all are reconciled in the Person of Christ, the living Logos. The Cartesian circle of reason closes upon itself; the Christian circle opens outward into worship. The former ends in solipsism; the latter in song.

Thus the drama of modern thought, from Descartes' doubt to the scepticism of his heirs, finds resolution not in argument but in adoration. "The intellect that kneels," Sayles concludes, "is lifted into light."[37] The divided mind becomes the reconciled soul, and philosophy, at last, becomes theology fulfilled.

Footnotes

1. S. C. Sayles, *The Divided Mind: Contending Descartes*, Introduction.
2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.i.1.
3. Ibid., ch. 1.
4. Augustine, *Confessions*, VII. 10.
5. S. C. Sayles, *The Divided Mind*, Preface.
6. Ibid., "The Epistemological Fall."
7. Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, IV.
8. S. C. Sayles, *The Divided Mind*, Part II.
9. Ibid., "The Parody of Sinai."
10. Ibid., ch. 2.
11. Ibid., ch. 3, "The Dust and the Breath."
12. Ibid., "Providence Translated into Physics."
13. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.v.9.
14. Sayles, *The Divided Mind*, "Christ and the Restoration of Presence."
15. Ibid., "The Logos and the World."
16. René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, IV.

17. Sayles, *The Divided Mind*, ch. 5.
18. Calvin, *Institutes*, II. ii. 12.
19. Sayles, ibid., “The Criterion on Trial.”
20. Ibid., “The Circular Proof.”
21. Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, II.
22. Sayles, *The Divided Mind*, ch. 5.
23. Van Til, ibid., II.
24. Sayles, *The Divided Mind*, “The Neutral Mind.”
25. Ibid., “The Ember of the Logos.”
26. Ibid., “He Speaks, Therefore I Am.”
27. Augustine, *Confessions*, XIII. 35.
28. Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, III.
29. S. C. Sayles, *The Architecture of the Mind* (forthcoming).
30. Calvin, *Institutes*, II. ii. 15.
31. Sayles, *The Architecture of the Mind*, Proposition 5.
32. Sayles, *The Divided Mind*, “The Worship of the Intellect.”
33. Augustine, *Sermons*, 43. 7.
34. Sayles, *The Divided Mind*, “The Orbit of Praise.”
35. Ibid., “Epilogue: The World Re-Enchanted.”
36. Ibid., “The Spirit Who Unites.”
37. Ibid., Doxological Close.